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U.S. Security and Politics

Charges Traded by Backers of Carter and Reagan Are Reminiscent of 1960 Debate on 'Missile Gap'

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WASHINGTON, Aug. 28—Whether the two major-party Presidential candidates are misusing sensitive intelligence information and undercutting American national security as a result of their political tactics has emerged as one of the livelier issues of the 1980 campaign.

News Analysis

In the last week, supporters of President Carter and of his Republican opponent, Ronald Reagan, have traded charges reminiscent of the "missile gap" debate of 1960, when the Democratic contender, John F. Kennedy, accused the Eisenhower Administration of covering up a growing Soviet edge in missile power. Subsequently, Mr. Kennedy acknowledged there was no gap.

This time, it is the Republicans who are on the offensive, charging that Mr. Carter and his aides are recklessly using secret information to bolster his chances for re-election. In support of their argument, they cite last week's disclosure of a Pentagon project to build a bomber that would be almost invisible to enemy radar.

President's Aides Reply

In response, senior Carter aides, including Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, are contending that by exaggerating American military deficiencies, the Republicans are undermining national security.

To the surprise of many political veterans in Washington, national security, at least for the moment, is dominating the campaign debate. The Republicans, in their platform adopted last month in Detroit, seized the initiative in the debate by charging that American defenses under Mr. Carter had become a "shambles" and by promising that with Mr. Reagan, as President, the United States could once again obtain "military superiority."

In recent days, however, the Democrats have counterattacked by taking several steps that are widely regarded as an effort to dilute the charge that Mr. Carter is "soft" on military matters. In a speech last week, Secretary Brown detailed the Administration's new nuclear targeting policy, which, as the Republican platform does, calls for American forces to be able to knock out military forces in the Soviet Union.

New Generation of Planes

Two days later, in a news conference at the Pentagon, Mr. Brown announced that the Administration was working on a new generation of aircraft, "invisible" to Soviet radar, that would "alter the military balance" with the Russians.

These moves have probably helped Mr. Carter refurbish his image on defense, which was tarnished in 1977 in the view of some critics by his decision to cancel the B-1 bomber and a year later by deferring production of the neutron bomb. In his address last week, Mr. Brown not only

approving a new bomber but also said the President was moving ahead on the development of cruise missiles, a new submarine-launched missile, the Trident 1, and the Air Force's MX mobile rocket program.

At the same time, the Administration's attempt to improve its image raises troubling questions about the impact of campaign politics on national security. For example, Republicans, such as Senator John G. Tower of Texas, charged last weekend that in disclosing the progress that had been made in reducing Moscow's ability to detect American aircraft, Mr. Carter and Mr. Brown had "violated the sanctity of some of the most tightly controlled and highly classified information."

Charges and Denials

Another Republican, William R. Van Cleave, an adviser to Mr. Reagan on military matters, told reporters that "Jimmy Carter is obviously so concerned about the emerging truth of the dangerous state of our military capability after three years of his Administration that he is willing to put in jeopardy the eventual success of this program by announcing it prematurely."

Mr. Van Cleave and other Reagan advisers also suggested that in announcing a new nuclear policy in the midst of the campaign, the Administration was more interested in scoring political points than in strengthening nuclear deterrence.

Mr. Carter's supporters have heatedly denied these charges. Defense aides, for instance, contended that the nuclear-targeting decision had not been prompted by Republican attacks but resulted from more than two years of careful inter-agency review. The decision last week to discuss efforts to make aircraft "invisible" to Soviet radar, they added, was necessitated by budget considerations: To obtain increased financing from Congress next year, the Administration had to inform Capitol Hill of the project, which, in the view of the Pentagon, made disclosure of the program inevitable.

Strong Language From Brown

But while denying that it is playing politics with defense, the Administration is charging that Mr. Reagan is guilty of this practice. Asked last week about Mr. Reagan's criticisms, Secretary Brown used uncharacteristically strong language in asserting that the Republicans had magnified the nation's military problems. "I think it is a serious matter when individuals claim the United States is very weak," he said.

Behind these charges and countercharges, there nevertheless seem to be some important differences between the two candidates on national security. While both have called for an accelerated defense effort, Mr. Carter has laid greater stress on the role that arms control negotiations can play in strengthening